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The Showdown Over CIA's "Dirty Tricks"

Even if the "secret war" in Nicaragua is endorsed by Congress, debate over covert action will not end.

The uproar in Congress over Central Intelligence Agency support for Nicaragua's anti-Sandinista rebels is the storm front of a bigger controversy about covert U.S. actions worldwide.

The broad issue at stake in the battle, which was headed for a showdown in Congress in late July, is this: Is it moral or even feasible for the United States, with its open society, to employ "dirty tricks" to promote its foreign policy?

At a rare closed session of the House of Representatives on July 19, administration critics used the moral argument in calling for a cutoff of funds to 10,000 or more rebels in Nicaragua.

That argument is summed up by Representative Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.) with the claim that the "secret war" in Nicaragua "undercuts the U.S. image in the world as a nation that acts legally, fairly, decently and overtly."

Aid held vital. White House officials insist that help for the anti-Sandinista guerrillas is vital to stop the flow of military supplies from Nicaragua's Marxist government to leftist guerrilla forces in El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America.

The controversy is shaping up as a major test not only for Reagan's Central American policy but also for his plan to rehabilitate covert action as a key element in U.S. overseas strategy. In this, he has reversed a policy initiated during the Ford and Carter administrations that virtually dismantled the CIA's department of "dirty tricks."

The action by Presidents Ford and Carter stemmed from disclosures in 1974 and 1975 that CIA clandestine operations had included spying on Americans—such as in illegally opening mail and penetrating antiwar organizations—and plotting to assassinate several hostile foreign leaders.

Rebuilding. Over the past 30 months, William Casey, Reagan's CIA director, has given high priority to rebuilding the agency's capability to conduct covert operations. The administration has left little doubt that it sees such actions as essential and legitimate weapons in America's arsenal.

Now, that policy is facing its stiffest challenge from the congressional revolt against supporting anti-Sandinista guerrillas in Nicaragua. Why has the operation triggered such a reaction?

One reason is widespread concern about the danger that the U.S. will be drawn into a shooting war in Central

Congress, too, now subjects covert activity to close monitoring—a duty it took on formally after the scandals that broke in the mid-1970s.

Other operations. Intelligence specialists point out that, while the Nicaraguan project is under attack, other covert operations have come to light without provoking a negative reaction. A notable example is CIA support for anti-Soviet rebels in Afghanistan.

"Nobody is raising a finger to that," observes former CIA Director Stansfield Turner, "because we'd be glad if Afghan freedom fighters take over their government."

Still, there is a faction of lawmakers that is challenging not only the Nicaraguan action but also, on principle, the morality of American covert operations. Critics such as Representative Jim Leach (R-Iowa) say these actions make hypocrisy of democratic law and lower the United States "down into the gutter of Communist-type behavior."

Aside from moral considerations, critics claim that covert actions have proved counterproductive, leaving a legacy of bitterness against the U.S. in many parts of the world. They attribute

CIA-backed Nicaraguan rebels are at the heart of the covert-action controversy.



WASHINGTON TIMES

28 July 1983

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE C.3

Q&A

Turner sizes up trouble spots

Adm. Stansfield Turner on the world's trouble spots.

When Naval Academy graduate Jimmy Carter needed a new director of the Central Intelligence Agency, he turned to Adm. Stansfield Turner. Now a youthful-looking 56, Stan Turner is writing a book on the problems of reconciling a free society with a secret agency, and fighting his old shop in the courts for permission to tell more of his experiences.

Turner was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford University the same year as Ambassador Talcott Seelye — whose interview appeared in this space yesterday. In a conversation with Washington Times diplomatic correspondent Russell Warren Howe in his McLean, Va., home, Turner predicted that the world's upcoming flashpoints would be Thailand and Pakistan, and that the MX missile will never be built.

Q: I'd like to pick your classified memory, if I may, and ask you to use it to interpret some events of today. To begin with, the latest Soviet proposals in the arms-reduction talks in Geneva offer no substantial change in ceilings from Moscow's earlier proposals, but they're being interpreted by the administration as a sort of victory for tough American negotiation. Is the Soviet Union taking advantage of the approach of our quadrennial election circus, and the administration's need for at least one foreign-policy success, to end Geneva on Moscow's terms?

A: The Soviets will certainly attempt to. They have to decide whether the administration needs a sort of victory so badly that it will agree to any cosmetic compromise that can be interpreted as a success, or whether the president is so sure of re-election that they might be better off to meet the United States halfway now.

Q: From your knowledge and experience of the Soviet positions, do you think there's a serious hope of strategic or tactical nuclear-arms reductions?

of the world

A: I'm not optimistic. Andropov is new. He's still consolidating his power. He needs the support of the military, which in any country is congenitally opposed to giving up anything that it has, especially its advantages over the adversary. The MX has always been more of a pressure tool than anything else, to get arms reduction. As a weapon, it doesn't really add much. So we can expect a lot of detailed work, and I don't think it's likely to be finished in the 16 months between now and the election.

Q: No proposal works if it only serves the interests of one side.

A: Exactly, and I'm sure we've looked carefully enough at our proposals to see if they would be in Moscow's interests, as well as ours. I will predict, here and now, that there will never be one single MX missile deployed, and I think the Soviets know that.

Q: Is there any hope of arresting proliferation?

A: At best, we can try to slow it down. I doubt that we can stop a determined effort. The more time we have, the more likely it is that countries will work together — even we and the Soviets — to prevent use. You can argue logically — though I can't accept it as a basis for action — that the nuclear weapon has preserved the peace between the major powers, and that when there are two rivals it is better for both to have the bomb rather than only one of them. Despite their horror, nuclear weapons have a basically stabilizing effect. But the further down the line you get, the greater is the threat that someone will use a nuclear weapon — for example, for or against Israel.

The Soviets and we, I believe, have behaved quite responsibly with respect to nuclear weapons. Arms control is not the only way to stabilize the nuclear relationship. If we would renounce things like the MX which, because of its inherent vulnerability, can be seen only as a first-strike

weapon that would destabilize the situation between us and the Soviets, and instead go only for weapons that have assured retaliatory capability, we would be taking a major step toward stability in the nuclear world.

We don't have to be able to match them, weapon for weapon. We don't have to be able to "win" a nuclear war. You have to ask yourself: If I start a nuclear war, will the damage I receive in return be unacceptable to me? — not will I do twice as much damage to my opponent as he does to me?

Q: It was on your watch that the CIA established its own officers and agents in Israel, instead of relying on the Mossad. What do you think are Israel's intentions?

A: I think under the Begin policies, Israel intends to continue to use its superior military position. I hope we can act as a catalyst between the Arabs and the Israelis, and induce the Israelis not to try to live primarily by the sword, and the Arabs not to respond primarily by the sword. It's very unfortunate that the PLO appears to be moving back from a willingness to negotiate under Arafat to a more military, let's-defeat-the-Israelis attitude. I believe, over the long run, that this can lead to a very serious situation.

Q: You mean conflict?

A: I think the possibility of future conflict is very high. The Arabs can beat Israel because they have the manpower and the money to spare. They can lose wars, and all their troops will go to Heaven, and the Saudis will

replace the equipment, and they'll try again, and eventually they'll wreak havoc within the state of Israel.

Q: What about Lebanon?

A: I think the Israelis went into Lebanon with some ill-advised assumptions about what might happen: first, that they could install a solid government that would be favorable to Israel over all of Lebanon; and second, that they could drive the PLO totally away. These assumptions have been rather wrong! They're working on a more ad hoc basis now, rather

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